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ENGLAND AND DRINK

BY SYDNEY BROOKS

The proposal that the State should take over the liquor trade of the United Kingdom at a cost of over \$2,000,000,000 is one of the most interesting developments of the war. Financially it ought to prove a good investment. Socially there could hardly be a more beneficent undertaking. Politically it would have the result of freeing British public life from an influence that has been always unpleasant and sometimes degrading. Administratively it seems the only just and the only effective solution of a problem that has baffled British statesmanship for centuries. A dozen years ago Lord Rosebery declared that if the State did not control the traffic in drink, the traffic in drink would control the State. His judgment was but too amply confirmed by what happened in 1908. The Licensing Bill of that year was the most powerful and earnest effort that this generation has witnessed to assert the supremacy of the State over the liquor trade. It had four main purposes: (1) To impose a time-limit of fourteen years on the expiration of which all saloon licenses were to revert to the State and such of them as were reissued were to be subjected to far higher duties than hitherto; (2) to reduce the excessive numbers of licensed premises; (3) to restore to the Justices their old unfettered discretion over licensed houses; and (4) to give to the people in each locality a right to say whether they would have a new license in their area.

It is exceedingly difficult to say what England as a whole thinks of any given measure. But my pretty clear impression at the time was that the best and most moderate opinion in the country approved the Licensing Bill, realized that unless its principal objects could be carried out it would no longer be possible to deny that in England beer ruled,

and looked upon the imposition of a time-limit as the only means by which the State could resume control over the monopoly it had created. I do not recall that the cry of robbery and confiscation with which the brewers deafened the public ear had much weight with reflecting people. On the masses it unquestionably had an effect and taken in conjunction with the "Socialistic" tendencies ascribed to the then Government—they seem humdrum enough now in retrospect—it no doubt led a good many middle-class people into the belief that "property" was actually "in danger." But on the whole, considering the intensity of the brewers' campaign against the bill, considering, too, the enormous intricacies of the problem and the passions it aroused, I think the measure was one with more solid and non-partisan support behind it than any Licensing Bill of my time. It was debated in the House of Commons for six weeks, and the Government showed by the concessions it made in committee and by its whole conduct of the measure that it had no wish whatever to press the extreme temperance point of view. The third reading was passed through the House of Commons by the immense majority of 237.

Here, then, was a measure the general scope and purpose of which were discussed on every platform during the General Election of 1906, a measure which the Government had a clear mandate to carry through, a measure dealing with a question of crucial moment to the well-being of the country and adopted by the representatives of the people after a discussion that extended over nine or ten months by an almost unprecedented majority. Yet everyone remembers its fate when it went up to the House of Lords. A really impartial Revising Chamber would, of course, have been glad to second the efforts of the Government in writing such a measure of reform on the statute book. As the professed guardian of the public interest it would have scorned to be moved by the brewers' agitation, and would have resisted the preposterous argument that the license issued by the State became the freehold property of the licensee and that any change in its conditions was equivalent to "spoliation." But the House of Lords took a very different line. Lord Lansdowne summoned a meeting of Conservative peers at his own house in Belgrave Square. It was there decided, after a debate of less than two hours, to reject the bill on its second reading. The programme was duly carried out.

When the bill came up for its second reading the bishops and several of the weightiest and most respected members of the House protested against its destruction. It was to no purpose. Lord Lansdowne had the bulk of his party behind him and the bill was thrown out by 276 to 96. The Lords acted as a purely Conservative caucus; they wrecked in two hours the labors of nine months; they threw over the interests of the community and upheld the interests of a trade that everywhere except in England is under the social ban; they demonstrated with the most striking emphasis that though the Liberals might be in office it was the Conservatives who were in power; and they furnished Lord Rosebery's prediction with a mournful justification. There have been few more discreditable episodes in relatively recent British politics.

Before the war our people were spending about \$800,000,000 a year on drink. This was about six times as much as the Army cost us, nearly four times the amount of the Navy estimates, exceeded the total railway receipts by all but \$250,000,000, was greater than the annual value of all the private dwellings in the kingdom, and furnished the State with about a quarter of its revenue. Nearly five-eighths of the national drink bill went in beer, about a third in spirits, and one-thirteenth in wine. The expenditure per head on the basis of the whole population worked out at just over \$17, but as there were some 3,000,000 abstainers, and about 15,000,000 children under the age of fifteen, the actual consumers of alcohol must have been spending an average of over \$30 apiece. In many a working-class family that can hardly have meant less than one-sixth of the family income was devoted to drink. About \$1,500,000,000 has been invested in the trade in the British Isles; over 110,000 premises are licensed for the sale of alcohol; some eight thousand registered clubs are in existence, a great many of which are simply unlicensed drinking-shops, free from any effective supervision; and the number of people who hold shares in brewery and distilling companies must run into several hundreds of thousands. Moreover, most of the public houses in this country are what is called "tied" houses. That is to say, they are owned by the brewing or distilling companies, whose influence thus finds a local rallying point in every town and village in the land. No other interest is quite so closely or so pervasively organized. As

a general statement it is safe to say that in England corporations and politics either keep apart or that the connection between them is incidental and fairly wholesome. Great industries, of course, are represented, as they should be, in the House of Commons. The shipping industry and the railways are particularly strong. But on the whole the only business that is marshalled as a political force and that plays politics as a matter of course is the liquor business. There have been times when it seemed as though it had given up brewing and distilling for the sake of conducting vast electioneering campaigns.

Now it is clear that the attitude of the State towards a business so huge, so militant, so intimately related to the social life of the people, and so productive of revenue, must always be a matter of supreme importance. In Great Britain, as everywhere else, there is no free trade in the sale of intoxicants. Sale is only permitted by license, the number of licenses is limited, their duration is confined to twelve months, and at the end of the year they must all be renewed. No holder of a license possesses a legal right to have it renewed. Renewal may be refused at the discretion of the local licensing justices (subject to appeal to quarter-sessions) for various reasons—if the public house, for instance, has been improperly conducted, or if there are too many of them in the district. I think there is no question that Parliament intended licenses to be the property of the State, liable to termination at the end of any twelve months, and that in point of law the license-holder has no vested interest in his license beyond the period of one year. The point has, indeed, been definitely established more than once by judicial decisions. On the other hand, the license-holder has the reasonable expectation that his license will be renewed unless on grounds of gross misconduct. And this "reasonable expectation" has naturally developed a monetary value. The licensing justices have hesitated to cancel licenses. They have been inevitably reluctant to take away a man's livelihood. The result is that a well-run house has little or nothing to fear from the annual formality of renewing its license. Moreover, the State by levying death duties on licensed premises on the basis of the license being a continuing possession; the local authorities by proceeding on the same assumption in the matter of assessments; and the courts of law by protecting the rights of those interested in

the reversion or remainder of a license—have all shown that the expectation of renewal is all but a certainty.

And in this expectation, which is all but a certainty, many millions of pounds have been invested. The brewers, as I have said, have acquired control of the licensed premises, often at extravagant prices, and they figure of course among the assets of the brewing companies. Thus the situation has become immensely complicated by the fact that an army of shareholders has come to have a direct pecuniary interest in regarding licenses, not as annual and revocable privileges, which is their proper legal status, but as permanent grants. An immense amount of capital has been staked on what I have called the "reasonable expectation" that licenses would be renewed. It is easy enough to say that the money should never have been so invested, that the law was perfectly clear, and that those who insisted on treating a probability as an unqualified certainty were simply gambling and would have no right to complain if they were made to suffer the consequences of their rashness. But as a matter of hard fact no Government can ignore these thousands upon thousands of innocent investors who have put down their money, for the most part, in ignorance of the facts, without looking into the pros and cons of a very intricate question, and blindly following the financial fashion of the moment. Their presence has had two important results. It has rallied a powerful body of opinion to the view that a license, instead of being an annual tenure, is virtually a freehold and has thus made any drastic remedy by the State, short of complete expropriation, politically impossible. Secondly, it has had the effect of popularizing the notion that compensation should be provided for every license that is extinguished.

As a consequence of these various factors it has come about that the State has practically parted with its control of the liquor traffic. It has issued annual licenses at a very low rate of duty. These annual licenses have acquired a high value principally because their prospect of renewal has been very good. They have changed hands and been bought and sold at prices which were the equivalent of a freehold and monopoly value. But from these increased prices the State, until quite recently, has derived nothing whatever. Issuing low-duty licenses for one year, it has had the mortification of seeing them treated by hard-headed

men of business as though they were licenses for all time. It has, in short, created a vast property, largely monopolistic in character, and has handed it over without receiving in return any adequate consideration. In 1904 the Unionist Government passed a Licensing Bill which in some ways perpetuated the improvidence of the State and added to the one-sidedness of its relations with the trade. The bill went on the principle that compensation ought to be paid in the event of a license being withdrawn for any other cause than that of misconduct; and it provided the necessary funds by imposing a graduated tax on all public houses in the district, a tax locally raised and administered. The effect of this was that the license-holder found a new security given to his property, its value immensely increased through the extinction of rivals, and compensation provided if his license were refused renewal—all this without the State being a penny the better. The bill was vigorously opposed by the Liberals, who made no attempt either at the time of its passage or during the General Election to conceal their determination to amend it when they again found themselves in power.

That was the task to which they addressed themselves at the beginning of 1908. It was made all the more formidable by reason of the very parlous state in which the brewery companies found themselves. During the previous ten years their shares had greatly depreciated. The value of the shares in twenty-three leading companies showed a decline that averaged over 60 per cent. This was not the fault of any Government, but simply of the company promoters and managers. They had bought up public houses at preposterous figures; they had overcapitalized their concerns; and they had made no adequate provision for writing down their inflated capital or the exorbitant amounts at which their precarious license values stood in their books. The brewery boom was dead; people were drinking far less than they did; and the condition of the stock market since the Boer War had depressed the value of all securities. The brewers in 1908 felt that if, on the top of all this, the State was now to begin harrassing them once more and was to resume its control over the licenses that figured among the most imposing assets in their balance sheets, then ruin and a widespread crash were inevitable. They prepared therefore to put up the fight of their lives. At the same time the

immensity of the interests involved and the undoubted certainty that too stern a policy would reduce a large number of shareholders to penury or something near it, made it necessary for the Government to deal as tenderly as possible with vested interests and to recognize the claims of equity on a liberal scale.

The Licensing Bill which they brought forward was an extremely intricate and technical measure, but its main objects were clear. First, the bill sought to provide for an immediate and compulsory reduction in the number of licenses. There was to be, roughly speaking, not more than one public house to 750 people in the towns and to 400 people in the country. Secondly, the bill provided for the gradual but complete recovery by the State of those rights in the monopoly of the drink traffic with which it should never have parted. It effected this by imposing a time-limit of fourteen years, after which compensation should cease to be payable for any extinction of old licenses, and all applications for renewals should be treated as though they were applications for new licenses and only issued on the basis of their full monopoly value. The bill had other aims as well. It established, for instance, with regard to new licenses, the right of localities to exercise a veto. It proposed a more effectual system of supervision over clubs in order that the extinction of the public houses might not be nullified by the growth of unlicensed and unregulated drinking dens. It empowered the licensing authorities to exclude children from public houses, to order their closing on Sundays and on election days, and to prohibit the employment of barmaids. It provided, too, that while the compensation fund was to continue during the next fourteen years to be drawn from the trade, the methods of assessments were to be changed so that its benefits might be distributed on a fairer and more uniform scale. But these provisions, while important, were of little significance by the side of the two main purposes of the bill: to reduce the number of licenses—Mr. Asquith hoped to wipe out thirty thousand—and to recover for the State after a period of fourteen years its full control over the drink traffic.

It was a keen challenge to the trade and there was not the least hesitation in taking it up. The brewers and the distillers denounced the bill as a wholesale piece of confiscatory fanaticism. They warned the public that, if it

passed, no property of whatever kind would be safe. They stigmatized the proposed time-limit, which, after all, merely required the trade to find an annual sinking fund of about five per cent on the total value of the beer and spirits sold in the public houses, as unblushing robbery. The means they employed to arouse hostility against the measure established a new record in electioneering impudence. To meetings and pamphlets and newspaper articles and every instrument of legitimate propaganda no objection could be taken. That the trade should have mustered in force at every by-election and should have done all they could by argument and appeal to defeat the Government candidates was natural and reasonable. But when it came to wealthy brewers trying to bully the Church into resisting the bill, threatening to cut off their subscriptions to charities if it passed, menacing tradesmen with the loss of custom and working men with the loss of employment, wailing their appeals on behalf of the widows and the orphans who were the misguided holders of brewery shares, and replying to every argument of national policy and of social justice or well-being with the conclusive shout: "Your beer will cost you more!"—when it came to this, and in England ten years ago it got beyond it, then I think the limits of political indecency had pretty well been reached.

There had never since the Liberals came into office been the smallest secret of how they intended to deal with the licensing problem. The brewers had foreseen the bill for two years and were prepared for it. They were splendidly organized; they had an enormous campaign fund at their disposal; with the exception of the *Morning Post*, all the Unionist papers were on their side; every bar and restaurant contained a flaming petition of protest which its patrons were pressed to sign; every public house in the country became a centre of electioneering proselytism; every shareholder was adjured in circular after circular to make his voice heard. The Church, it is pleasant to recall, stood by the Government and the bill unflinchingly, sinking for the time all other questions in order to forward what it felt to be a cause of national moment, and steadfastly disregarding both the importunities and the threats of the trade. But the Lords capitulated and the end was that meeting at a famous house in a famous square and the rejection of the bill. I do not think anyone who remembers those days will

feel other than drawn towards a scheme of State purchase which by its very finality must for ever put a stop to scenes and incidents so full of humiliation for the credit of our public life. Nor do I see how anyone who reflects on the hopeless legal and political entanglement in which the licensing problem had become involved can regret that there is at last a prospect of its being severed by the sword of the State.

The triumph of the brewers proved a short-lived one. The engine of taxation was brought heavily to bear upon them in the Budget of 1909. For the first time the State took something like a fair toll of the monopoly values it had itself created. But that the trade had still an immense power in the House of Commons was shown perhaps more clearly after the outbreak of the war than at any time before it. "Drink," said Mr. Lloyd George in February, 1915, "is doing us more damage in the war than all the German submarines put together." And a little later he declared: "We are fighting Germany, Austria and Drink; and as far as I can see the greatest of these three deadly foes is Drink." The Chancellor of the Exchequer, as he then was, spoke by the book. He knew better than any man how alarmingly the output of our shipyards and munitions factories was being curtailed by drink and how large a proportion of the increased wages of the workmen was being spent in the public houses. He would himself have favored complete prohibition for the duration of the war, but the Cabinet shrank from so daring a leap. He sought accordingly for an effective compromise only to find that in the matter of controlling the drink traffic everybody and every party had "previous convictions." He assured the House, as he well might, that "after the experience of weeks of trying to get a solution that will not provoke controversy, I feel at the end of it I am prepared to take, politically, a pledge never to touch drink again." The proposals he ultimately introduced in April, 1915, included powers to close or control public houses in munition, transport and training areas, the doubling of the duty on spirits, a stiffly graded surtax on beers, and the quadrupling of the duty on wines. Instantly the Unionists and the Nationalists, English beer and Irish stout and whiskey, were up in arms; the whiskey taxes were cancelled; the new duties on beer and wines were withdrawn; and all that Mr. Lloyd George saved from the

wreckage was a bill prohibiting the sale of spirits under three years of age, and the appointment of a Central Control Board to administer the powers taken in the Defence of the Realm Act for the control of licensed premises in munition-producing and similar areas. Here, again, it is obvious that, had State purchase been in operation before the war, the emergency that confronted and defeated the Government in 1915 could either never have arisen or would have been dealt with by a simple administrative order.

I do not suppose that anyone is particularly proud of our drink record during the war. There was a moment, in the first exaltations of the struggle, when I believe the country would have accepted prohibition or any other sacrifice at the bidding of the Government. But that moment, if it ever existed, was permitted to pass, and our policy since then in regard to drink has been characteristically unheroic. It was a clear case of allowing a national habit to continue, even at some loss of war efficiency, rather than face the tumult that would have been stirred up by an attempt to suppress it. But while we did nothing dramatic and have followed our natural bent by avoiding sudden extremes, none the less by one unsensational step after another we steadily abated the worst evils of alcoholism. By rigorously cutting down the hours within which drink might be sold, by forbidding treating, by closing many public houses altogether, by starting canteens at the munitions works, by limiting the amount of beer that might be brewed and of whiskey that might be distilled, by lowering at the same time their alcoholic content, by prohibiting off-sales and sales on credit, and in certain areas, as for instance, at Carlisle, by taking over the complete control of the business—by these and similar measures an immense change was wrought, not in our national habits but in their consequences.

The statistics tell the tale. In 1914 there were 176,000 convictions for drunkenness. In the following year the number was decreased by over 40,000; in 1916 it fell to 84,000; in 1917 it was somewhere in the neighborhood of 50,000. In other words, so far as the police court records are a fair gauge, there was over three times as much drunkenness in 1914 as in 1917; and no sociologist will regard it as a mere coincidence that the figures for infant mortality are today the lowest in our annals. Whether we are actu-

ally drinking less I am not sure, but it is quite clear that we are drinking less alcohol, about half as much, I should judge, as we were consuming in the year before the war, when no self-respecting working-man would have tolerated the light beers and attenuated spirits that he is now obliged to put up with. But at the same time we are spending more on drink than ever before. The drink bill for 1914 was \$820,000,000; for 1917 it was all but \$1,300,000,000. Nothing could be more eloquent of the national determination to keep up the good old national customs at any cost and under any circumstances. Reformers may rage, may point out that up to the end of the war we were still employing 150,000 men of all ages, directly or indirectly, in the sale and manufacture of intoxicants, may urge that the 600,000 tons of barley that were used in the breweries in one year might have made 268,000,000 four-pound loaves of bread, and may insist that it was sheer humbug to talk of putting our last ounce of strength and our last shilling into the war when we allowed this monstrous waste of money and energy to continue. But the only answer of the British working-man was to raise his glass with a hearty "'Ere's 'ow."

Emphatically we are a drinking people, always have been, and always will be. I said at the beginning of this article that the drink problem had baffled British statesmanship for centuries. The statement was literally true. For the past seven or eight hundred years the problems to which it gives rise have been the constant preoccupation of the people, the clergy and the legislature. There was a distinct temperance movement in the sixth century, some early-closing enactments in the thirteenth, a regular licensing system in the fifteenth, and a whole series of penalties imposed on drunkards and innkeepers by legislation in 1603. The eighteenth century saw some of the hardest drinking and the wildest liquor laws in all human experience; and from the beginning to the end of the nineteenth century hardly five years went by without the drink question in some form or other coming up before Parliament. Those who inveigh against the present and talk of the England of today as though it were given to drink on a quite unparalleled scale can have little knowledge of the past. I was reading the other day in Macauley that in 1688 the people consumed 90 gallons of alcohol per head; they now drink only about 27. A century and a half ago there was one public house to

every six homes and every fifty people; there is now but one public house to every eighty homes and to every 350 or so people. Drunkenness, too, besides having virtually died out as a society accomplishment, has steadily diminished among all classes. Our people show not the least inclination to give up drink, but they take it in more decent fashion. There is less excessive indulgence, a growing preference for the lighter kinds of liquor, more moderate drinking but less drunkenness, more use but less abuse.

Indeed for the past ten years and more there have been loud complaints that England is growing sober. The complaints have come from hotels and public houses, the managers of restaurants, the directors and shareholders of brewery companies, the secretaries of the big London clubs, and finally and in greatest anguish from successive Chancellors of the Exchequer. All have found their receipts diminishing and all have ascribed it to a real and permanent alteration in the habits of the people, an alteration they welcomed as social reformers but deplored as financiers. The figures confirm their apprehensions. During the thirty years prior to 1873-76 there was a steady and very large increase in the consumption of intoxicants. Then a downward movement set in and reached its lowest point in 1888. It was succeeded by an upward wave which, after a slight check in 1893 and 1894, culminated in 1898-1902. Since then there has been a somewhat rapid falling-off, but the amount drunk, though it has never reached the record figures of 1873-76, is still greater than it was in 1888. If the statistics of the last fifty years can be held to demonstrate anything it is that poverty does not lead to nearly so much drinking as prosperity. Bad times and scarcity of employment mean that the wage-earner, who is the real mainstay of the brewer, has less to spend at the public house. In other words, it is not poverty that takes him there but affluence; poverty drives him out. To improve his condition, therefore, in the hope of thereby winning him over to temperance, seems a policy that is storing up for itself some bitter disappointments.

On the other hand, it does not necessarily follow that good wages and improved conditions always mean more drinking. If such were their invariable effect we should today be drinking more, instead of less, than we were drinking thirty years ago. We smoke well over a third more

than we did in the seventies, consume half as much sugar again and drink fifty per cent more tea, but we are less and not more indulgent in spirits, wine and beer. If we spent as much on alcoholic liquors today in proportion to the population as we spent thirty years ago, our drink bill just before the war would have been at least \$125,000,000 more than it was, and if the increase in drink had kept pace since the seventies with the increase in tobacco, the drink bill for 1913 would have been probably \$400,000,000 higher than it was. There has clearly been a shifting of tastes and I should judge a wholesome one.

The countries that drink most are not necessarily the most drunken. On paper the greatest drinkers in the world are the French. They consume about fifteen gallons more of alcohol per head than we do. Yet France is a notoriously temperate country. Before the phylloxera ravaged the vines and led to spirit-drinking, the French probably held the palm for sobriety among European peoples. Italy, Spain and Portugal, being wine-growing and wine-consuming countries, have large statistics of consumption, but are as a matter of fact exceedingly temperate. Northern Russia, Scandinavia and Scotland are the most drunken parts of Europe, though the consumption of alcohol per head is comparatively low. Climate and race have much to do in determining such matters. A warm country is naturally a sober and usually a gambling country. A raw, dull and damp climate predisposes to indulgence. Thus the northern counties of England are more drunken than the southern, Scotland is more drunken than England, and the west coast of Scotland more drunken than the east. The predominant, vigorous, fighting races of Europe, if not of the world, seem always to have been given to strong drink. Energy, enterprise and drink have hitherto been invariably associated in the sum total of national character; and the idea so popular in America just now that temperance makes for virility and that the way to develop strength of character is to run away from temptation instead of meeting and mastering it, is one that has never found favor with our people.

We in Great Britain have an ingrained hatred of all social bigots and fanatics, and the prohibition of drink is about the last cause that is ever likely to succeed in Great Britain. For myself I rejoice in that fact. There are moments, it is true, when one can forgive an English tem-

perance advocate everything. He may exaggerate, he may be unpractical, he may be defeating his own ends by his unmeasured violence, but the provocation he meets with in the spectacle of the crime, the wretchedness, and the physical and mental deterioration for which drink is largely responsible in Great Britain is undoubtedly prodigious. But a wider philosophy and a deeper experience of life convince one that it is better for a community to drink in moderation than to attempt the impossible task of imposing abstinence by force. There is a masculine calmness and common sense in the British attitude towards such questions that social reformers, instead of girding at, should seek to imitate and to profit by. I detest the political influence and the social position which the liquor trade has won for itself in my country. But I certainly do not want to "rob the British working-man of his beer." On the contrary, I want to educate or induce him to drink as much of it as is good for him and no more. And the most effective steps that can be taken to these ends are, first, to provide him with his favorite beverage in the most wholesome form—to stimulate, in other words, his growing preference for light beers—and secondly, to see that he has a chance of drinking it in clean and cheerful surroundings, in an establishment where he can buy things to eat as well as drink and can consume them sitting down at tables instead of standing up at a bar. Destroy the public house as a drinking den merely and convert it into a miniature restaurant and place of recreation, and temperance will have gained the most powerful ally it can ever hope or desire to secure. It is because the resources of the State can alone effect these reforms that State purchase of the liquor trade on terms that are financially equitable to all the interests embraced by it seems to me a project of the most hopeful significance.

SYDNEY BROOKS.